

## Recommendations Regarding the Nomenclature of Systematic Botany.

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We, the undersigned, feel constrained to protest against the recent attempts made in the United States to change botanical nomenclature on theoretical grounds. In our opinion most of the suggested changes, even if they were generally adopted, could lead only to great confusion. An explanatory statement of the reasons, which compel us to take this action, is herewith briefly given.

So far as the nomenclature of systematic botany is effective, it has been and should be developed only in intimate relation to scientific investigation, and must be subject to constant modification with varying ideas of plant-affinities. Although attempts may be made to control its growth, its real development, especially as to generic names, is largely determined by usage. By judicious recommendations greater and greater uniformity in the application of botanical names may doubtless be obtained, but to make rules<sup>1)</sup> at serious variance with the customs of the past and to give them retroactive effect can only tend to complicate botanical language. For even if we depart from the nomenclature of former writers we can by no means avoid the constant necessity of using their works. Guided as to nomenclature by general custom writers of the last hundred and fifty years have accumulated the vast quantity of facts and produced the voluminous literature of our science. While its nomenclature is by no means uniform, it is with unimportant exceptions readily intelligible to working botanists. To reform this nomenclature upon theoretical grounds will not alter the importance of works of the past, which are likely always to remain the historic basis of classification. Thus the result of any serious change would be the necessity of acquiring two sets of names instead of one. Realizing keenly how serious would be the burden thus imposed not only upon systematists but upon all who are interested in any branch of botanical research as well as in the more practical aspects of the science such as pharmacy and horticulture, the undersigned urge postponement of any radical measures of reform.

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1) For example, the recently proposed principle of "once a synonym always a synonym", and the still more arbitrary ruling that a variety and species may not hold the same name under one genus.

One of the most essential features of an efficient botanical nomenclature is a cosmopolitan character. It is very unlikely, therefore, that any lasting or satisfactory modification of the present system can be effected without international agreement<sup>1</sup>). Whether this can be obtained and can lead to practical and generally acceptable results remains to be seen, but certainly until the subject can have further international consideration it is likely that radical changes will do much more harm than good. The recent suggestions for reforming botanical nomenclature in the United States are not in accord with the usage of any other nation nor are they in the light of recent foreign publications likely to meet with favor, to say nothing of general adoption outside of our own country. Even if the proposed reform could be carried out in America it would thus give a most unfortunate local tendency to scientific expression and thereby do much to stultify the whole system of Latin nomenclature, which has been elaborated largely for international convenience. For the present, therefore, serious changes cannot be too scrupulously avoided, and as a basis of publication the following rules are recommended as those most conducive to stability without the disadvantages of a more rigid code. These rules are designed to apply only to phænogams and vascular cryptogams. Botanists of all departments, however, are constantly obliged to make use of phænogamic names, and all are therefore more or less concerned in the preservation of a convenient phænogamic nomenclature.

1. Ordinal names, having been established by long usage, should not be subjected to revision upon theoretical grounds.

2. Long-established and generally known generic names, such as *Liatris*, *Desmodium*, *Dalea*, *Calycanthus*, *Carya*, *Aspidium*, and others, should be retained. While the scope of this rule is left to the discretion of writers, it is urged that generic nomenclature should not at present depart far from that of the three important works, BENTHAM and HOOKER's *Genera Plantarum*, BAILLON's *Histoire des Plantes*, and ENGLER and PRANTL's *Natürliche Pflanzenfamilien*, from which for some time to come our most complete and accurate information, as to generic limits and affinities, is to be derived.

3. In specific nomenclature the first correct combination is to be preferred. The theoretical reason for this is clear. The specific name is adjectival in its nature, and parted from its generic noun, loses its significance. Moreover, the transfer of a misplaced plant to its correct genus is in general a more important service than its description under an incorrect genus, and the first correct combination of generic and specific names is, therefore, justly worthy of regard. But the most important reason for adopting this

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1) From the published statements of prominent German and Austrian botanists there is every prospect that the whole subject of botanical nomenclature will meet with early consideration by representative international congress to be convened at an early date.

ruling lies in the practical stability to be derived from it. For in nearly all cases the first correct combination can be definitely ascertained. On the other hand, if there is any departure from this principle and any attempt to combine earlier specific names with those of the accepted genera, there must be a lasting doubt as to the validity of nearly all post-linnæan specific names. For very few of them can be so securely established that they will be free from constant danger of being displaced by the discovery, in some obscure work, of slightly older names used perhaps under remote genera. Added to this inherent lack of stability the unqualified adoption of the first specific name leads to indefiniteness through the constant endeavor to base our nomenclature upon more and more remote, fragmentary, and obscure descriptions of the past, such as those of Rafinesque, while in general the first correct combinations, having been formed in more recent times when generic and specific limits were better understood, have been based upon or accompanied by fuller descriptions, forming a much sounder foundation for nomenclature. For these reason it seems best to adopt the principle of priority under the genus, the whole question of determining in individual cases the proper scientific name being thus greatly simplified, since all competing names are under the same generic designation. It is to be emphasized, however, that this ruling does not lessen the obligation of botanists of the present and future in making a transfer of a species from one genus to another to preserve scrupulously the specific name without alteration, except in the case of an existing homonym.

4. The varietal name is to be regarded as inferior in rank to the specific. The variety is the least definite category of classification, and varietal names have not only been treated with much greater laxity than the specific, but are generally unindexed, so that it would be a work of years to collate them. To bring them (as advocated by certain recent works) into active competition with specific names would thus tend immeasurably to increase the difficulties of an ultimate settlement of specific nomenclature. The rule that a variety may not hold the same name as a species in the same genus is highly arbitrary, and would lead not only to the renaming of thousands of varieties, but the practical impossibility of using in large genera like *Aster*, *Solidago*, *Senecio*, *Solanum*, and *Carex* any telling descriptive names for varieties, since all such have long since been used for species.

No specific name should be altered, because of preexisting varietal names for the same plant. Nevertheless, it is recommended as a working rule that whenever a variety is raised to specific or a species depressed to varietal rank the name should be preserved whenever possible.

5. The principle of »once a synonym always a synonym«, while recommended as an excellent working rule for present and future, may not justly be made retroactive.



## Signed: —

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Obige Empfehlungen für die Nomenclatur der botanischen Systematik haben wir hiermit zum Abdruck gebracht, um auch denjenigen Mitgliedern der vom internationalen botanischen Congress zu Genua (1892) eingesetzten Nomenclatur-Commission, welche dieselben nicht erhalten haben sollten, zur Kenntnisnahme und eventuellen Äußerung darüber Gelegenheit zu geben.

P. ASCHERSON. A. ENGLER.

4) This signature is qualified by following reservation: As a statement of the principles or theory of binomial nomenclature, I concur with the above argument, but I am unwilling to subscribe to any code until it shall have been carefully considered by representative assemblies of botanists of the country or the world. Binomial nomenclature is but a special form of language, and all permanent progress in language, as in all other human institutions, is known to be the result of an evolution or growth of the new out of the old. I am convinced that mere arbitrary and artificial standards — such as those lately proposed — cannot have an abiding value. In fact, in the immediate application of them they may admit of as many variations and errors of judgment as the methods do which they are designed to supplant. The starting-points of the proposed new nomenclature seem to me to be more vague and uncertain than those of the old. This is particularly true of the use of the oldest specific name as compared with the use of the oldest complete name or combination. I therefore believe that usage is the only foundation upon which an enduring and intelligible structure can be built.